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<HEROES AT HOME.>

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We may say what we like about the worthlessness of the world and the

solid charms of home, but the plain fact, stripped of oratorical

disguise, is that we mostly give society the best we have and keep the

worst of ourselves for our own. The hero at home is not half so fine a

fellow as the hero in public, and cares far less for his audience.

Indeed, when looked at under the domestic microscope, he is frequently

found to be eminently un-heroic ~~ something of the nature of a botch

rather than nobility in undress and an ideal brought down to the line

of sight; which would be the case if he and all things else were what

they seem, and if heroism, like fine gold, was good all through. This

is not saying that the hero in public is a cheat. He has only turned

the best of his cloak outside, and hidden the seams and frays next his

skin. We know that every man's cloak must have its seams and frays;

and the vital question for each man's life is, Who ought to see most

of them, strangers or friends? We fear it must be owned that, whoever

ought, it is our friends who do get the worst of our wardrobe ~~ the

people we love, and for whom we would willingly die if necessary;

whilst strangers, for whom we have no kind of affection, are treated

to the freshest of the velvet and the brightest of the embroidery. The

man, say, who is pre-eminently good company abroad, who keeps a

dinner-table alive with his quick wit and keen repartee, and who has

always on hand a store of unhackneyed anecdotes, the latest <hi> on dits </hi>,

and the newest information not known to Reuter, but who hangs up his

fiddle at his own fireside and in the bosom of his family is as silent

as the vocal Memnon at midnight, is not necessarily a cheat. He is an

actor without a part to play or a stage whereon to play it; a hero

without a flag; a bit of brute matter without an energizing force.

The excitement of applause, the good wine and the pleasant dishes, the

bright eyes of pretty women, the half-concealed jealousy of clever

men, the sensation of shining ~~ all these things, which are spurs to

him abroad, are wanting at home; and he has not the originating

faculty which enables him to dispense with these incentives. He is a

first-class hero on his own ground; but it would be a tremendous

downfall to his reputation were his admirers to see him as he is off

parade, without the pomps and vanities to show him to advantage. He

has just been the social hero of a dinner; <p> 'so bright, so lively, so

delightful,' </p> says the hostess enthusiastically, with a side blow to

her own proprietor, who perhaps is pleasant enough by the domestic

hearth but only a dumb dog in public. The party has been <p> 'made' </p> by

him, rescued from universal dullness by his efforts alone; and every

woman admires him as he leaves in a polite blaze of glory, and only

wishes he could be secured for her own little affair next week. So he

takes his departure, a hero to the last, with a happy thought for

<reg orig=”every one”> everyone </reg>

and a bright word all round. The hall-door closes on him,

and the hero sinks into the husband. He is as much transformed as soon

as he steps inside his brougham as was ever Cinderella after twelve,

with her state coach and footmen gone to pumpkin and green lizards. He

likes his wife well enough, as wives and liking go; but she does not

stir him up intellectually, and her applause is no whetstone for his

wit. Put the veriest chit of a girl as bodkin between them and he will

waken into life again, and become once more the conversational hero,

because he is no longer wholly at home. His wife probably does not

like it, and she laughs, as wives do, when she hears his praises from

those who know him only at his best, letting off his fireworks for the

applause of the crowd.

But then wives are proverbially unflattering in their estimates of

their husbands' heroics; and the Truth that used to live at the bottom

of a well has changed her name and abode in these later times, and has

come to mean the partner of your joys, who gives you her candid

opinion at home. Still, your good company abroad who sits like a mute

Memnon at home is not pleasant, though not necessarily a sham.

Certainly he is no hero all through, but he may be nothing worse than

one of those unfortunates whose intellect lives on drams and does not

take kindly to domestic pudding.

His wife does not approve of this hanging up of the fiddle by his own

fireside; yet she does the same thing on her side, and is as little a

heroine by the domestic hearth as he is a hero. What his talk is to

him her beauty is to her; and for whom, let us ask, does she make

herself loveliest? For her husband, or for a handful of fops and snobs

each one of whom individually is more indifferent to her than the

other? See her in society, a very Venus dressed by Worth and Bond

Street, if not by the Graces. Follow her home, and see her as her maid

sees her. The abundant <hi> chevelure </hi>, which is the admiration of the men

and the envy of the women who believe in it, is taken off and hung up

like her great-grandfather's wig, leaving her small round head covered

by a wisp of ragged ends broken and burnt by dyes and restorers; her

bloom of glycerine and powder is washed from her face, showing the

faded skin and betraying lines beneath; the antimony is rubbed off her

eyelids; the effects of belladonna leave her now contracting pupils;

her perfectly moulded form is laid aside with her dress; and the fair

queen of the <hi> salon </hi> ~~ the heroine of gaslight loveliness ~~ stands as a

lay-figure with bare tracts of possibilities whereon the artist may

work, but which tracts nature has forgotten or which she herself has

worked on so unmercifully as to have worn out. How many a heartache

would be healed if only the heroine, like the hero, could be followed

to the sanctuary of the dressing-room, and if the adored could appear

to the adorer as does the one to the maid the other to the valet!

The tender, sympathetic, moist-eyed woman who condoles so sweetly with

your little troubles, and whose affectionate compassion soothes you

like the trickling of sweet waters or the cooling breath of a pleasant

air, but who leaves her sick husband at home to get through the weary

hours as he best may, who bullies her servants and scolds her

children ~~ she too, is a heroine of a class that does not look well

when closely studied. The pretty young mother, making play with her

pretty young children in the Park ~~ a smiling picture of love and

loveliness ~~ when followed home, turning into a fretful, self-indulgent

fine lady, flung wearily into an easy chair, sending the children up

to the nursery and probably seeing them no more until Park hour

to-morrow, when their beautiful little <hi> têtes d'ange </hi> will enhance her

own loveliness in the eyes of men, and make her more beautiful because

making the picture more complete; Mrs. Jellaby given up to universal

philanthropy, refusing a crust to the beggar at her own gate, but full

of tearful pity for the misery she has undertaken to mitigate at

Borioboolagha; Croesus scattering showers of gold abroad, and

applauded to the echo when his name, with the donation following, is

read out at a public dinner, but looking after the cheese-parings at

home; the eloquent upholder of human equality in public, snubbing in

private all who are one degree below him in the social scale, and

treating his servants like dogs; the no less eloquent descanter on the

motto <hi> Noblesse oblige </hi>, when the house-door is shut between him and

the world, running honesty so fine that it is almost undistinguishable

from roguery ~~ all these heroes abroad show but shabbily at home, and

make their heroism within the four walls literally a vanishing

quantity.

People who live on the outside of the charmed circle of letters, but

who believe that the men and women that compose it are of a different

mould from the rest of mankind, and who long to be permitted to

penetrate the rose-hedge and learn the facts of Armida's garden for

themselves, sometimes learn them too clearly for their dreams to be

ever possible again. They have a favourite author ~~ a poet, say, or a

novelist. If a poet, he is probably one whose songs are full of that

delicious melancholy which makes them so divinely sad; an æsthetic

poet; a blighted being; a creature walking in the moonlight among the

graves and watering their flowers with his tears: ~~ if a novelist, he

is one whose sprightly fancy makes the dull world gay. A friend takes

the worshipper to the shrine where the idol is to be found; in other

words, they go to call on him at his own house. The melancholy poet

<p> 'hidden in the light of thought,' </p> is a rubicund, rosy-gilled

gentleman, brisk, middle-aged, comfortable, respectable, particular as

to his wines, a connoisseur as to the merits of the <hi> chef </hi>,

a <hi> bon vivant </hi> of the Horatian order,

and in his talk prone to personal

gossip and feeble humour. The lively novelist, on the other hand, is a

taciturn, morose kind of person, afflicted with perennial catarrh,

ever ready with an unpleasant suggestion, given to start disagreeable

topics of a grave, not to say depressing, nature, perhaps a rabid

politician incapable of a give-and-take argument, or a pessimistic

economist, taking gloomy views of the currency and despondent about

our carrying trade.

As for the women, they never look the thing they are reputed to be,

save in fashion, and sometimes in beauty. A woman who goes to public

meetings and makes speeches on all kinds of subjects, tough as well as

doubtful, presents herself in society with the look of an old maid and

the address of a shy schoolgirl. A sour kind of essayist, who finds

everything wrong and nothing in its place, has a face like the full

moon and looks as if she fed on cream and butter. A novelist who sails

very near the wind, and on whom the critics are severe by principle,

is as quiet as a Quakeress in her conversation and as demure as a nun

in her bearing; while a writer of religious tracts has her gowns from

Paris and gives small suppers out of the proceeds. The public

character and the private being of almost every person in the world

differ widely from each other; and the hero of history who is also the

hero to his valet has yet to be found.

Some people call this difference inconsistency, and some

manysidedness; to some it argues unreality, to others it is but the

necessary consequence of a complex human nature, and a sign that the

mind needs the rest of alternation just as much as the body. We cannot

be always in the same groove, never changing our attitude nor object.

Is it inconsistency or supplement, contradiction or compensation? The

sterner moralists, and those whose minds dwell on tares, say the

former; those who look for wheat even on the stony ground and among

thorns assert the latter. Anyhow, it is certain that those who desire

ideals and who like to worship heroes would do well to content

themselves with adoration at a long range. Distance lends enchantment,

and ignorance is bliss in more cases than one. Heroism at home is

something like the delicacy of Brobdingnag, or the grandiosity of

Lilliput; and the undress of the domestic hearth is more favourable to

personal comfort than to public glory. To keep our ideals intact we

ought to keep them unknown. Our goddesses should not be seen eating

beefsteaks and drinking stout; our poets are their best in print, and

social small-talk does not come like truths divine mended from their

tongue; our sages and philanthropists gain nothing, and may lose much,

by being rashly followed to their firesides. Yet a man's good work and

brave word are, in any case, part of his real self, though they may

not be the whole; and even if he is not true metal all through, his

gold, so far as it goes, counts for more than its alloy, and his

public heroism overtops his private puerility.